

Review

Why do narcissists find conspiracy theories so appealing?

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Abstract

Narcissism—a conviction about one's superiority and entitlement to special treatment—is a robust predictor of belief in conspiracy theories. Recent developments in the study of narcissism suggest that it has three components: antagonism, agentic extraversion, and neuroticism. We argue that each of these components of narcissism might predispose people to endorse conspiracy theories due to different psychological processes. Specifically, we discuss the role of paranoia, gullibility, and the needs for dominance, control, and uniqueness. We also review parallel findings for narcissistic beliefs about one's social groups. We consider the wider implications this research might have, especially for political leadership. We conclude by discussing outstanding questions about sharing conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation.

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Keywords

Narcissism, Collective narcissism, Conspiracy theories, Paranoia, Uniqueness.

One of the classic questions in the study of conspiracy theories, accusing secret groups of colluding to achieve

nefarious goals [1], is which individual differences predispose people to believe in them. While the Big Five traits show weak associations with conspiracy beliefs [2], researchers find relatively consistent effects for the way people perceive themselves [3,4]. In three studies, all conducted with US samples, Cichocka and colleagues [5] demonstrated that endorsement of conspiracy theories was related to narcissism—a belief in one's superiority and a sense of entitlement to special treatment, characterised by sensitivity to threats [6–8]. Importantly, the effects were unique to narcissism and did not emerge for secure, non-narcissistic self-esteem—a positive self-evaluation characterised by feelings of adequacy and satisfaction with oneself, which can serve as a buffer against psychological threats [7].

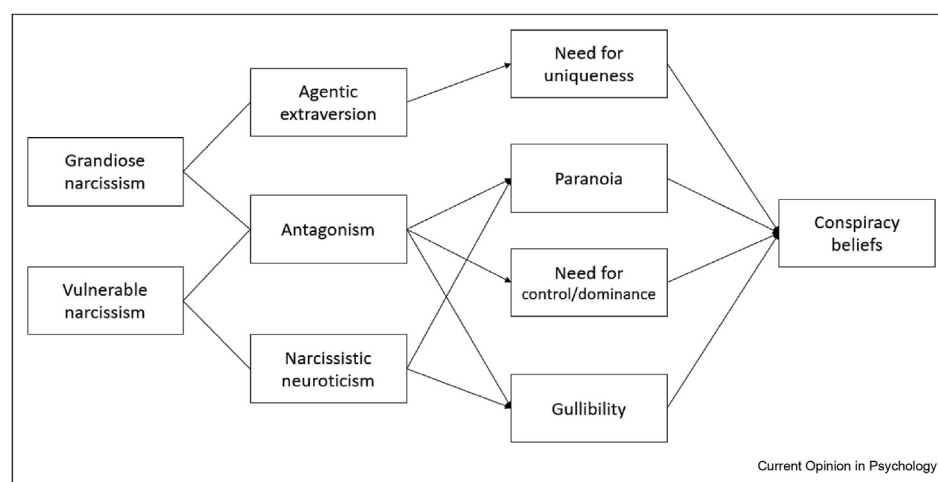
The effect of narcissism on conspiracy beliefs has been replicated in various contexts by multiple labs [9–14]. For example, Siem and colleagues [15] directly replicated Study 3 of Cichocka and colleagues [5] in a German sample. Their second study, also conducted in Germany, demonstrated a similar pattern of results with respect to belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19. Sternisko and colleagues [16] confirmed this relationship across 56 countries. Overall, meta-analytic effects ranging from $r = .22$ [3] to $r = .26$ [4] suggest that narcissism is one of the best psychological predictors of conspiracy beliefs. In this article, we rely on recent developments in research on narcissism and discuss four psychological mechanisms that might explain why narcissism increases the psychological appeal of conspiracy theories.

The different facets of narcissism

Researchers often distinguish between different types of narcissism (see Figure 1). Most often studied (including in the paper by Cichocka et al. [5]) is grandiose narcissism, regulated by two strategies [17]. First, grandiose narcissists strive to achieve admiration by boosting their egos through a sense of uniqueness, charm, and grandiose fantasizing. This strategy of assertive self-enhancement can also be referred to as agentic extraversion [6,18]. Second, narcissists use rivalry to manage any threats to the self via devaluing others, aggression, and striving for supremacy. This antagonistic self-protection is also known as narcissistic antagonism [6]. Antagonism also feeds into the so-

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Figure 1



Components of narcissism proposed by Miller and colleagues [6] and their links to conspiracy beliefs.

called vulnerable type of narcissism, which—instead of agentic extraversion—is regulated by narcissistic neuroticism, related to negative emotionality and self-consciousness [6,18].¹

We argue that the three facets underlying grandiose and vulnerable narcissism—*agentic extraversion*, *antagonism*, and *narcissistic neuroticism*—might be linked to conspiracy beliefs via different psychological processes. Below, we summarise existing research pointing to four potential mechanisms (inspired by [12]): 1) the need for uniqueness, 2) paranoia, 3) needs for control/dominance, and 4) gullibility (Figure 1 depicts paths consistent with existing empirical evidence).

Why does narcissism predict conspiracy beliefs?

Paranoia

Cichocka and colleagues [5] suggested that narcissists might endorse conspiracy theories due to their heightened paranoia: narcissists tend to believe that others are intentionally malicious and are out to get them. Although paranoia and conspiracy beliefs have different nomological networks, they share certain correlates, such as perceptions of threat from powerful people [20]. Thus, while some researchers treat paranoia as explicitly distinct from conspiracy beliefs [20], it is at least plausible that paranoid convictions that others threaten the self can spill into conspiracy beliefs about society being threatened more broadly.

¹ Although vulnerable narcissism is strongly linked to neuroticism as a basic personality trait [19], when controlling for neuroticism, vulnerable narcissism has unique associations with antagonism (as predicted by the three-factor model [6,18]), but also with distrust and suspiciousness [19]. The latter might explain why conspiracy beliefs tend to correlate with narcissistic but not “basic” neuroticism [2].

Indeed, in Study 2 by Cichocka and colleagues [5], the link between narcissism and conspiracy beliefs was mediated by paranoia. Kay [12] examined these processes more closely, comparing grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. While both were associated with conspiracy beliefs [12,21], paranoia accounted for the association between vulnerable narcissism and conspiracy beliefs, while it was less consistently linked to grandiose narcissism. The associations with paranoia were observed both for the more neurotic (e.g., hiding the self) and antagonistic (e.g., entitlement rage) aspects of vulnerable narcissism [12]. Hepper and colleagues [22], however, suggested that some aspects of grandiose narcissism might also be related to paranoia—these authors found that defensive self-protection linked both vulnerable narcissism and the antagonistic aspect of grandiose narcissism to paranoia. On balance, these findings suggest that paranoia might account for the association conspiracy beliefs have with two components of narcissism: neuroticism and antagonism.

Needs for dominance and control

Narcissistic antagonism might also increase the psychological appeal of conspiracy theories due to other factors. There is evidence pointing to the needs for dominance and control, which seem to predict conspiracy beliefs especially as a way of coping with anticipated defeat [23]. Conspiracy theories can help blame others for one’s failures or misfortunes as they identify a specific group that could be used as a “scapegoat”. Converging evidence [10,13] comes from work linking conspiracy beliefs not only to narcissism, but also other so-called dark personality traits characterised by callousness and manipulateness [24]: psychopathy and Machiavellianism [25]. The association between dark traits and conspiracy beliefs seems to be explained, in part, by distrusting others and desiring

control over them [13; cf., 12]. Overall, this work suggests that narcissistic antagonism is linked to conspiracy beliefs not only via paranoia, but also via needs for control and dominance.

Need for uniqueness

Although the orientation towards self-enhancement typical of agentic extraversion might be less predictive of paranoia or needs for dominance, it could be associated with conspiracy beliefs via different psychological processes. One such factor is the need for uniqueness [26,27], which is often associated with the admiration/agentic extraversion aspect of grandiose narcissism. High need for uniqueness likely increases the appeal of conspiracy theories because they promise access to privileged information, making one feel special [26,27]. Indeed, in the study by Kay [12], need for uniqueness emerged as a mediator between grandiose narcissism and conspiracy beliefs, and we argue this is likely due to the agentic extraversion component [cf. 14].

Gullibility

Although narcissists are typically overconfident in their abilities, judgments, and intelligence [28], they tend to be naive and less likely to engage in cognitive reflection [16,29,30]. For example, Hart and colleagues [31] found that those scoring high in narcissistic rivalry/antagonism (but not admiration/agentic extraversion) were more gullible, that is insensitive to cues of untrustworthiness and vulnerable to being manipulated. Furthermore, studies consistently show that both grandiose (especially its antagonistic, but less consistently agentic extroversive, component [12]) and vulnerable (its antagonistic and neurotic components [12]) narcissism are associated with a predisposition towards odd and unusual beliefs [32,13,14]. Conspiracy theories can be one example of such beliefs. There is also evidence that gullibility strengthens the association between narcissism and conspiracy beliefs. In a study by Ahadzadeh and colleagues [9], the link between narcissism and endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theories was especially pronounced among those who were not skeptical towards social media posts in the first place. Taken together, this research suggests that narcissistic antagonism and neuroticism might predict higher gullibility, further related to conspiracy beliefs.

Parallel effects of collective narcissism

Multiple studies indicate that conspiracy theories might not only be appealing to those high in *individual* narcissism, but also in *collective* narcissism—a belief that one's group is exceptional and deserves special treatment [5]. Collective narcissism predicts beliefs in conspiracy theories about outgroups [33–36], for instance accusing them of involvement in high-profile events (such as the

2019 Smolensk air disaster [37]). Collective narcissism has also been linked to beliefs in anti-science conspiracy theories (e.g., about vaccines [11,38], COVID-19 [16,36], or climate change [39]). These associations are typically explained by the exaggerated intergroup threat sensitivity of collective narcissists [33,37], analogous to the paranoia and threat sensitivity of individual narcissists. A conviction that one's group is unique and entitled to special treatment might also increase the need to deny or deflect from national failings by pointing a finger towards malevolent forces undermining the ingroup [16]. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that a motivation to restore personal control strengthens the association between collective narcissism and outgroup conspiracy beliefs [33], echoing the role of control and dominance motives in individual narcissism. Finally, given studies [16] linking collective narcissism to bullshit receptivity [40] and low cognitive reflection [30], it is at least plausible that gullibility also plays a role. Thus, collective and individual narcissism could be linked to conspiracy beliefs via similar psychological processes [41]. At the same time, while the effects of individual narcissism might be relatively stable across contexts, any effects of collective narcissism might depend on whether certain identities are important or salient to participants. More work is needed to examine these possibilities.

Implications

The robust evidence linking different components of narcissism to belief in conspiracy theories has important implications. Narcissists tend to view themselves as qualified for politics and tend to contemplate running for office [42]. Narcissism also seems to be higher among political leaders (vs. the general population [43]), especially those that are populist or autocratic [44]. Therefore, we can expect engagement with conspiracy theories among active politicians, particularly in times that challenge their feelings of power and control (e.g., elections [45,23]). This is concerning given the harmful societal consequences of conspiracy theories [1]. However, our review also highlights factors that might be targeted by interventions aiming to break the link between narcissism and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., satisfying control motives [33]).

Outstanding questions and future directions

Sharing conspiracy theories

Narcissists' craving for validation and recognition is likely to have implications not only for their beliefs but also for their behaviours. For example, on social media, narcissists might be ready to share anything that promises to generate engagement and attention. As conspiracy theories are entertaining and elicit strong emotions [46],

they might serve as attractive content to distribute. In fact, an unpublished undergraduate dissertation by India Wood demonstrated that narcissistic admiration was linked to sharing and liking (but not believing or fact-checking) social media posts containing COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Similarly, Enders and colleagues [10] found narcissism to be correlated with sharing false information online. Just as different components of narcissism are associated with conspiracy beliefs due to different processes, they could be linked to different motivations to share conspiracy theories. For example, while agentic extraversion might be associated with sharing conspiracy theories due to the need to draw attention to oneself, narcissistic neuroticism and antagonism might be linked to sharing conspiracy theories due to gullibility or seeking to manipulate others and blame them for one's misfortunes.

Are the effects unique to conspiracy theories?

Both with respect to conspiracy beliefs and sharing, a major challenge is establishing whether any effects observed are unique to conspiracy theories, or whether they might apply to any false or sensational content. This concern is not limited to the study of narcissism. Research focusing on conspiracy theories often considers them in isolation, failing to determine whether similar effects would be observed for other types of content or belief [cf [16,47]]. For example, narcissists might be ready to share any information, false or not, as long as it gets them the attention they crave. In this case, it might be the content of the conspiracy theories that would be especially appealing [48]. However, it is also possible that the secrecy and persecutory elements make conspiracy theories especially attractive to narcissists. In this case, it is the qualities of conspiracy theories that matter [48].

One way to disentangle these processes is to control for the propensity to believe and share other types of information. For example, Sternisko and colleagues [16] demonstrated that collective narcissism was associated with belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories over and above belief in other conspiracy theories, facts about COVID-19, or generalised bullshit receptivity. Similarly, the authors looked at sharing COVID-19 conspiracy theories over and above readiness to share other conspiracy theories or general facts about COVID-19. Future research could test similar processes for individual narcissism, as well as other predictors of engagement with conspiracy theories.

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Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- * of special interest
 - ** of outstanding interest
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